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ABSTRACT

Reasons that Hunter College of the City University of New York developed a Women's Studies Program, rather than a department, in 1975-1976 are discussed. Attention is directed to the question of what courses should become part of the program, along with efforts to expand course offerings and to foster collaboration with other programs and departments. Issues of academic freedom and program independence are also addressed. The ways that the Women's Studies Program increased academic outreach are considered, including the writing of an introductory textbook and workshops to help integrate the new scholarship on women into courses. Specific attention is focused on the need for a women's studies program, the academic reputation of women's studies as a discipline, whether the program can be a power base or ghetto in the academic community, and whether the issues of feminist scholarship are vital to the academic pursuits of a university. It is concluded that the roles that women studies programs play in reshaping fundamental scholarship are critical to their existence, as are their efforts to lead concern about issues involving classroom pedagogy. (Author/SW)

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ABSTRACT

for

"Program Expansion and Collaboration with Other Programs and Departments," a paper presented on the panel on WOMEN'S STUDIES : EXPANDING AND STRENGTHENING ITS INFLUENCE IN THE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY

at

a Symposium at the 1983 AERA Annual Meeting in Montreal.

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A description of the practical and fiscal reasons that led to the establishment of a Women's Studies Program at Hunter College of the City University of New York, rather than a department, in 1975-1976, including the question of which courses should become part of the program and several ways those involved in the program attempted to expand course offerings and foster collaboration with other programs and departments. The paper takes up the issues of academic freedom and program independence raised in this process, and indicated how the Hunter Women's Studies Program functioned to increase academic outreach: from writing a textbook for the introductory course to workshops to help integrate the new scholarship on women into the introductory courses in the rest of the curriculum to various sponsored and co-sponsored activities concerning women's studies. The conclusions reached are that the roles that such programs can play in reshaping fundamental scholarship are critical to their existence, as are their efforts to lead concern about issues involving classroom pedagogy. Issues involving faculty resistence remain unresolved, but programs can use these functions to make themselves a base for power rather than an academic ghetto.

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on

Women's Studies: Expanding and Strengthening Its Influence in the Academic Community.

Topic 1. Program Expansion and Collaboration with Other Programs and Departments.

Dorothy O. Helly

There are, according to Florence Howe, currently 432 women's studies programs in the United States. The program at Hunter College officially began in 1976, if one counts from the time at which its coordinator was appointed by the Provost and a budget allocated to it. Prior to that time, for five years, an informal program existed, counted in terms of courses given and meetings held and energy expended in bringing about its official existence and the acceptance by the college of a collateral major and a minor in women's studies. To achieve that official status, a group of faculty--both full time and part time, library staff, and students had to work together toward a common goal, by a process of mutual persuasion and consensus. Those efforts were expended on the unexamined conviction that an official program was required to achieve academic legitimacy.

The conviction sprang from the example of other programs and the basic division of modern university life into departments, despite the fact that those involved recognized that this program, women's studies, by its very nature, would be interdisciplinary and thus cross-departmental in its original composition. The pattern of curricular activities divided into departmental and, at Hunter College, "divisional" budgets meant that existence with academe was to be sustained by finding a secure niche within that already existing administrative structure.

The issues that concerned those who battled to this end were: achieving a course release for the coordinator, obtaining an office and a budget for some adjunct instructors, a part-time secretary, a typewriter, and modest travel funds. The most significant administrative question to be decided was whether to be housed under the dean of humanities and the arts or under the dean of social sciences, and in the event the choice was made by the dean who was willing to accept the program. In other words, to maintain the on-going existence of women's studies within the academic community, common sense dictated the achievement of an administrative base from which to build, a base that could be used as a source of power, not one that would isolate the program as an academic ghetto. Common sense was the practical solution to problems within the existing university structure. The other solution that had been used at the end of the 1960s by Black and Puerto Rican Studies, the creation of

a new department, was not even seriously raised. Why?

I can not answer that question in terms of a serious analytical comparison at this time. Instead, I can only offer some observations. The faculty who were involved in establishing a women's studies program at Hunter College were hired as full time or part time teachers by departments, with whom they identified in terms of their academic discipline. In retrospect, had the part-time faculty, who knew they had little chance of getting a full time job in those departments, had the opportunity to join instead a women's studies department, it is very possible that several of them would have been happy to do so. Their reason, at this level, would have been as pragmatic as the reason that kept full-time faculty indentified with the departments that had hired them. When the issue of whether women's studies might emerge as a discipline in its own right was considered in 1976 at Hunter College, the consensus was that it was not yet one. In fact, based on this view, the administrative pressure to create a women's studies major as a collateral one, that is, not a free-standing one, was endorsed without quibble by the faculty and students who designed the actual program. Whether a freer hand would have been achieved for expansion and any greater or lesser security of budget achieved in the coming years by departmental status is possibly a moot question, but in so far as women's studies programs may yet consider going that route, the ramifications deserve discussion among those concerned about the fate of women's studies in the next

decade. It is my understanding that only three such departments currently exist, and more should be known about them.

With a coordinator and a modest budget which allowed the program to offer three sections of women's studies each year, the first order of business for the fledgling enterprise was to find ways of "cross-listing" courses offered in other programs and departments to create an arrary of some substance for the students. This project immediately raised serious issues which have not yet been completely resolved. Should any course dealing with women be eligible for cross-listing? How did the women's studies program know about the content of such courses if they were taught by faculty not closely involved with women's studies? Should courses previously cross-listed but then taught by faculty not believed to be feminist in any scholarly sense continue to be cross-listed? Were these questions an infringement of academic freedom for a program any more than the vetting of courses by a department that hired its personnel would be? These were not easy issues.

To begin with, there was a need to be rather inclusive, and to encourage faculty to offer more courses within their departments that might be cross-listed. In this initial stage, there was a certain amount of new course development that took place within departments by faculty who were committed to women's studies and feminist issues. In addition, a move to make it possible for full-time faculty to equip themselves to teach the introductory course in women's studies--a faculty development seminar which will be

discussed on this panel-- proved to be the first real breakthrough in program expansion. This was true simply because it enabled those who had already been interested in women's studies to join with as many new faculty to form an enlarged interest group. As a conscious effort was made to draw these faculty from all the divisions of the college, the potential spread of the program's influence was also involved as well.

Once the faculty development seminar allowed the program to call upon full-time faculty to teach the introductory course as part of their regular teaching assignments, the budget of the program could use its adjunct money to sponsor courses not being offered at the college that seemed of especial interest to our students. In this fashion, new courses such as Women and the Law; Women and Development; Women and Health; Women, Crime, and Punishment; Women and the Economy, and Twentieth Century American Women Artists were introduced. The process was an experimental one. In the first place, under the structure of the college only a department can actually hire an instructor. Therefore, though the women's studies program advertised for, interviewed, and chose the instructors for these courses, it was dependent upon a regular college department to undertake the paperwork involved in putting the name and vita through the appropriate channels. That meant it was necessary for the coordinator to maintain good active relationships with department chairs for this purpose. It also meant that the personnel and budget committees of the

departments involved had to see no objection to the credentials of the person so hired. This was not necessarily as constraining as it might seem at first if one remembers that it is standard to hire part time faculty with a wide range of credentials, including graduate students. Nonetheless, it also meant that should the host department actually dislike the choice of the women's studies program (in this case the faculty on its policy committee), difficulties could ensue.

However, this relationship, which included assigning to the host department the FTE count of students in the classes, tended to be one of mutual satisfaction. Indeed, this system gradually opened up a way of regularizing the introduction of those of the new courses which caught sufficient student interest to make them seem to their host departments useful additions to their own programs. At first this meant that the host department agreed to pay for the instructor for the course every other semester it was offered; then it led to the question of whether the host department would simply take over the course entirely. But then a complication arose. If the course were no longer within the decision-making purview of the women's studies program, what say could the program have any longer over who taught it? If this control were lost, would control over the feminist content of the course also be subject to erosion? Would it become simply one more course that focussed

on women without any assurance that it offered the feminist scholarship intended for it when it was introduced by the women's studies program? Was such a concern an infringement of academic freedom anyway? Here we have returned to the same preoccupation mentioned above when the program first began the process of cross-listing courses. In fact, if all these courses, withthe exception of the introduction and senior seminar could be taught elsewhere in the college structure, what WAS the justification for the women's studies program? These are fundamental issues with which we must deal.

We will return to this question by a circuitous route, for it is first necessary to see in what other ways the women's studies program at Hunter went about other curriculum-related outreach. Major to this outreach are the faculty development seminar which enabled full-time faculty to teach the introductory course and the workshops currently in progress to integrate the new scholarship on women into the introductory courses elsewhere in the curriculum. These will be described by the next paper. Here I want to note that both these exercises in outreach have had the effect to expanding the base of interested and cooperative faculty who can be helpful to the program's survival, and this aspect of these efforts need to be understood. Other activities that constituted academic outreach, however, have included the sponsoring of annual women's studies prizes for student literary and artistic work, the sponsoring of a panel discussion on the

future of women's culture in connection with the opening of Judy Chicago's Dinner Party, the cosponsoring of a panel on women and energy with the Energy Policy Program at Hunter, and many smaller panel and workshop discussions involving students and outside speakers. Most recently two faculty identified with the program ran a conference on Women and Development in connection with the National Council of Research on Women, which is housed at Hunter College. A steady stream of such activities is important for asserting an academic presence in a college community and also aids the program in terms of giving it visibility to students and faculty who would otherwise not consider its existence noteworthy. In a similar way, outreach into the larger academic community is accomplished through the activities of many of the members of the program. It is important that three members of the program sit on the college committee on sexual harassment and can bring to those discussions the viewpoints and reading they have garned in their feminist scholarship. It is similarly important that a member of the committee planning a new child care center at the college should be from the program, and that another member engages in workshops for returning women students that emphasize the value to them of taking women's studies courses. What all these activities generate is expansion of awareness of the program among the college community.

With background, therefore, I would like to return to the issues earlier raised. I would sum them up as: (1) Why is a women's studies

program necessary? (2) What is the academic reputation of women's studies as a discipline? (3) Can a program be a base of power in the academic community or will it end as an academic ghetto? and (4) Are the issues of feminist scholarship vital to the academic pursuits of a university?

(1) First, let me say that my own experience tends to confirm the necessity of having a women's studies program on a campus. My reasons are the following. I believe that a great deal of important feminist scholarship, simply because that scholarship has proven that it is fundamental scholarship which is reshaping the disciplines in which it is working. However, I am also convinced that something unique has been developing which we call women's studies, a unique way of focusing on women which ideally brings to bear on the subject the possible insights that can be garnered from a wide range of disciplines. Thus while older disciplines are in the process of changing--indeed some of them being radically changed by the introduction of gender consciousness into their reconceptualization--women's studies allows a freedom of experimentation that is both productive in itself and generative as well of necessary changes in other disciplines. To create some base within the university for this to take place is useful to the process and may help aid it. My second reason for advocating the presense of a women's studies program has to do with the aid it gives in raising the consciousness of the academic community in general--students, faculty, administrators--to crucial questions concerning the university curriculum and

classroom pedagogy. This reason, however, I will leave to my fellow panelists to discuss. I would conclude this issue here merely by noting that the sheer presence of a women's studies program in a college community will have a catalytic effect on the bringing forth of essential agenda within that community for wide discussion.

(2) It is clear that for traditional academics who have neither read about nor discussed seriously the issues which make up feminist scholarship and the content of a women's studies program the presence of such a program on campus is seen as at best a joke and at worst a disgrace. What is noteworthy about discussions with such faculty and administrators is that they parody the issues that women's studies raises. I will leave to another panel presentation the heart of this question of faculty resistence. Here I would only add that it has practical reverberations in areas such as promotion and tenure decisions and budget allocations that are crucial and must be discussed in every academic community.

(3) If a women's studies program does exist, how can we ensure that it becomes a base for power and not any academic ghetto? First, in most universities, departments are just that: bases of power, not academic ghettos. Therefore, what makes this problem different for a women's studies program? How does an academic area become a base of power? For one thing, it has a budgetary base that enables it to provide a significant ongoing program. What might make a women's studies program an academic ghetto? If it were reduced to

offering one or two courses without being able to cross-list courses; if those faculty who staffed it were capable of being isolated from the rest of the academic community and found no wider interest groups in touch with what their goals were. These are real possibilities, but not, I think, for any program that plans carefully to involve itself in college--wide activities, that plans to expand its circle of interested faculty, that reaches out to wide student appeal, and that continues to provide real academic leadership in matters having to do with scholarship.

(4) Thus I end with the conclusion that feminist scholarship, the achievement of over a dozen years of academic pursuit, provides women's studies with its firmest base for academic power. It is the realization that this feminist perspective lies at the heart of women's studies that makes the issue of the content of the courses cross-listed under its name such a crucial matter. The pratical issue of how to achieve this goal within the constraints of the academic community as it is currently structured, however, is a sensitive one. The solution may lie in building up a greater recognition among all who make decisions of the meaning and validity of that approach on the one hand and in compromise diplomacy in achieving the goal on the other. Peer observations as well as student evaluations are the acceptable tools of constructive criticism in academe in this matter andissues such as the classroom climate for learning may be involved. Since what happens in the classroom, however, can be affected far more readily by the choice of instructor

than by any other means, that remains the key issue for women's studies programs. Feminist scholarship is now making its impact felt throughout the academic world; its corollary, feminist pedagogy, is only beginning to make an impact.